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ABSTRACT

Teaching drama gave one instructor a chance to renew herself, and drama became an important part of a personal teaching renaissance. An elective class for grade 12 entitled "Humanities and the Arts" offered opportunity for collaborative teaching with colleagues in their areas of expertise. In a class on "Modern Drama" designed for honors students, students (after complaining about the modern classic dramas they were reading) were challenged to write and perform their own one-act plays, then were evaluated by their teacher, a drama coach, and their peers. Subject matter included drug overdoses, alcohol abuse, genetic engineering, fatherhood, and date rape. The dramatic exercise demonstrated to the students what they could achieve as learners coming from a different perspective as well as the magnitude of their own generation's social concerns. When each play was over, the students in the audience were asked to critique the play. In the final exam the students were asked to reflect about their opportunity to work so directly with drama. The collaborative teaching aspect could include a history teacher or a music teacher in the interdisciplinary nature of the class. (CR)

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ED 396 351

Drama: an Interdisciplinary, Collaborative Exercise

What are some of the uses of drama in secondary education today, and what are some of the results gained from using drama in secondary education in the U. S. of the late 1990's? Since I am an English teacher engaged in evolving (with the assistance of the newest educational movements sweeping the nation currently), I wish to speak to these issues. In this climate of reform and restructuring, of interdisciplinary teaching and collaboration, of alternative assessment and exhibitions, the time may just be ripe for a look at the way using drama in the classroom can assist the learning process.

In my twenty years in the classroom, I have constantly searched for ways to maintain a fresh viewpoint on curriculum that I had become accustomed to teaching. It was in an effort to revitalize and energize myself that brought me to understand that if I wanted to keep students engaged, I would have to sharpen my own attitude toward what I was teaching. The first solution to the problem of not growing stale, led me to graduate courses which opened up new avenues of exploration in the subject matter of the curriculum. The second step took me on a never-ending journey to become computer-literate. Concomitant with these two effective strategies for

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avoiding burn-out, was a technique that had taken hold in my particular teaching style from the beginning. It was insidious, it was invisible to me, it was all-consuming; and it would ultimately define my "teaching personality."

Since 1972 I have taught an English elective for twelfth graders titled, "Humanities and the Arts." This elective was designed to challenge those students who demonstrate more than a passing interest in literature, art, music, history, architecture, religions, cultures of the world, and/ or classical languages. It was also designed to attract students whose interests lie in interdisciplinary directions. While teaching "Humanities and the Arts", over the years, I found it to be a natural place for experimenting with alternative assessment techniques such as portfolios and exhibitions. Students attracted to this course have usually been those who have been accustomed to "performance" and "exhibition." Even the concept of having students create a rubric (a set of criteria on which they would be graded) for themselves and their peers was a natural evolution that emanated from students watching each other perform or exhibit their own works. So, also, from the time I undertook to teach this course, I had been inviting my colleagues to participate in classroom lectures with me, since I believed they had greater expertise than I in their particular areas of "art", or "history", or "music", etc. Collaboration was also a very natural outcome of teaching this kind of class. I could easily manage the literature and the writing, but when I felt a subject called for particular expertise, I had no qualms about enlisting a willing colleague to teach beside me. Fortunately, no one of my

acquaintances on the faculty ever turned down an invitation into my classroom, or an opportunity to transform one of their lessons into an interdisciplinary, collaborative one for both of us. So, interdisciplinary teaching and collaboration became second nature to me before it became a newly recognized teaching style.

The use of drama had been there from the beginning also. It evolved piecemeal, along with students' performances and exhibitions. Drama was always a part of these techniques. Drama has always had a part in English classrooms. But, about three years ago, I had a chance to renew myself once again and drama became an important part of this personal teaching renaissance.

Since a revered colleague had retired, it fell to me to teach the English elective which had been his special demesne for many years. For any teacher this is always a challenging and saddening dilemma because, while you realize that you can never fill another's shoes, and that students have been attracted to the course because of the special charisma of another; you must step up to the plate. The course was, "Modern Drama," and the curriculum outlined what was to be accomplished, and what was to be taught. My colleague had had his own twist on the curriculum and it was my task to overcome all of those obstacles and to devise a way to make the course my own. This course was designed for "honors" students and it was equipped with a syllabus of required readings. In September, the students were disappointed not to find their favorite teacher behind the desk, and I was more than a little

disheartened at their lack of enthusiasm for me. After a few weeks, during class discussions, students complained about the selections we had been reading together. These works were classics of the American theater by Miller, Williams and Albee that students demonstrated little appreciation for, and I sought a method to magnify their dramatic stature. One of my students remarked that, "Anyone could write a play!" That comment caused me to challenge the class, quite spontaneously, to write their own one-act plays. Many of the students had elected the course because they were involved in drama classes in our high school and had acted in a number of plays. So, I decided that they would cast their plays with classmates, we would engage the assistance of the drama coach who would be a willing critic of their work. (It was a stroke of fate that this teacher's planning period coincided with their class period). Furthermore, it was decided that they would receive a grade from me, the drama coach, and their peers who would evaluate each play and serve, at the same time, as the audience for the performances. We allowed one eight-week marking period for this enterprise, during which time, we would continue reading plays from the syllabus of dramas within the course curriculum, but the cumulative, outside-of-class writing assignment, which (with my predecessor) had always been a research paper on one of the plays or one of the playwrights studied, would now be each student's one-act play and its performance for the class with both the drama coach and myself as evaluators. The students hailed this challenge, and there was a new attitude in the class and even toward what was being read.

Three weeks before the end of the marking period, students handed in a typewritten copy of their plays which I read, and after working on some revisions with the students, I xeroxed multiple copies of each play. Each "playwright" had the opportunity to cast his own play. It was his option to hold as many rehearsals as he felt necessary beforehand. I set up a schedule of performances that would be held in the auditorium for the last two weeks of class.

I must admit that there were many surprises for all of us during these performances. First of all, when I had read the plays, I missed much of what came to life on stage, which shouldn't have been so surprising to me, after all. But for some reason, I didn't expect quite such a vivifying experience in the hands of novice writers. Two or three of the plays made astounding theater. One of the plays went on to be performed for the public by the high school acting company that year. Many of the plays reflected the lives of these students and so, they were about drug overdoses, alcohol abuse and genetic engineering.

One young man acted the lead in his one-act play about fatherhood. It concerned a young man desperately in need of money applying to a "sperm" bank to become a donor. All of the action takes place in the waiting room where the young man meets several others who are awaiting their turn to assist humanity in procreating itself. Each would-be donor has a monologue in which he examines his reasons for being there. Finally, the spotlight is on the lead actor alone. In a really moving soliloquy, he casts aside his facile

reasons for being a sperm donor saying, "Not everyone deserves to be someone's father."

In another play written by a young lady who happened to have a sister a year older attending college, the subject of date-rape was very effectively dealt with. In this play there were only four characters; the main character had been raped, but was afraid to tell anyone thinking that she would suffer a bad reputation by revealing her problem. Eventually, in a conversation with a friend, her story comes out and she is persuaded to file charges against the young man involved to deter him from victimizing other young women. At the end of the play, the boy is expelled from college and taken away in handcuffs by the police.

All of these plays proved to the students that writing a play--even a bad play-- is anything but an easy task. We had some examples of those, but even they served an effective purpose. Everyone learned much more about appreciating more facets of playwrighting than I could have taught them in the traditional manner. But for me and for the students there was one immensely important occurrance during the performances which I reiterated every chance that I could. Both the drama coach and I sat in the audience made up of the playwright's peer group. When each play was over, we asked the students from the audience to critique the play. At first, we asked only for the most positive comments they could make. Later, after one or two courageous playwrights themselves, asked for negative feedback, the audience felt easier about offering helpful commentary on the play or on a

character. After the students had had their opportunity to critique each work, the drama coach would offer a few observations from his perspective, and finally, it would be my turn. Each teacher felt compelled to point out only the strengths we witnessed in these dramatic performances, hoping to fan the fires of self-esteem that grew out of this assignment. But every opportunity I got, I explained to the students how fortunate they were to hear the critique of two teachers who were collaborating in order to bring about their successful completion of the assignment.

In their final examination, I asked the students to reflect about their opportunity to work so directly with drama. Most of them felt that their experience had been meaningful. Some wrote about their favorite plays from among those that the class wrote, and how astonished they were to find such talent either as actors or as writers among their friends. Many of them expressed a desire to continue trying to write plays, but all of them said that now they appreciated the difficulty of trying to breathe a life into a character on the stage.

I feel that this dramatic exercise demonstrated to the students what they could achieve as learners coming from a different perspective. I know it also demonstrated to them the magnitude of their own generation's social concerns. Collaborating with another teacher taught each of us a renewed respect for the work of the other. It also provided each of us with another way of looking at drama, of using drama in the classroom. Even though this collaboration was a natural marriage, I can envision drawing in a third expert

for another essay at this use of drama. This lesson can easily call for a history teacher, or a music teacher, etc. to be added to the interdisciplinary nature of the class.